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ABSTRACT

As the United States seeks to reform its schools, it is well-advised to look to the practices of other nations. In fact, as this paper shows, the United States historically has made a habit of borrowing educational ideas from other countries and adapting them to its own uses. This paper briefly surveys some of the educational ideas the United States has borrowed and adapted, and why U.S. ideas on education have had only a limited impact in Japan. (DB)

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By
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Comparisons offer insights into how we and other countries conduct our politics, economics, literature, law, education, and so on. We are curious, want to see how others do things, want to improve ourselves, and want to find a better way.

National school comparisons have become increasingly important. Societies wants to improve their children's upbringing, better their life chances--and more importantly--strengthen national economies, improve political systems, assure social stability, and create better citizens. We all borrow, adapt, and export educational ideas. Americans borrowed and adapted to our needs the kindergarten from Germany, the 8-year elementary school from Prussia, the graduate university from Germany, the college preparatory Latin grammar school from Europe, the academy from England. The academy, our second kind of secondary school after the Latin grammar school, came from Quakers and other non-Anglicans barred at the time on religious grounds from attending Oxford and Cambridge colleges. Ben Franklin, as apprentice printer in London, saw academies and adapted them. His Philadelphia academy was a terminal secondary school where middle class young people learned practical skills, trades, or professions. The high school, our third type of secondary school, began with the Boston high school, 1821, said to be modeled on and named after the successful secondary school on Edinburgh, Scotland's High Street.

One-fourth of our young people earn a college bachelor's degree. Nearly half of these transfer from widely available community colleges. The popular community college, which some think may become as universal as our high school, evolved from the junior college. William Rainey Harper is credited with its adoption, when he was president of the University of Chicago, which was the third U.S. graduate university (after Johns Hopkins, 1876; Clark University, 1887; Chicago, 1902). European colleges offered undergraduate instruction, but German universities particularly were places for original research and graduate study, which was what Harper wanted. He also admired the six-year European secondary schools for providing basic knowledge and for their school-leaving certificate exams, age 18 or 19, which were also the matriculation certificate for university entrance:

the French Lycee's Baccalaureat exam, the German Gymnasium's Abitur exam, and the British Sixth Form's General Certificate of Education A or Advanced level exam. Harper wanted junior colleges to become the academic top of six-year high schools in the U.S. It never happened. Adult education needs and institutional opportunities mounted rapidly through evening high schools, YMCA colleges, Chautauqua lectures, and others, transforming the junior college to an all-purpose postsecondary close-to-home community college, offering terminal job skills, cultural knowledge for personal enjoyment, and college preparatory courses. It soon became the fastest growing segment of American education.

We borrowed from abroad more school ideas than we exported. Japan, for example, adapted the American junior college or community college as a post senior secondary finishing school for women, with some post senior secondary technical courses for men. West Africa's Nigeria mainly adapted the American land-grant college, which originally applied science and technology to agriculture and industry.

An interesting American borrowing occurred in the 1876 Philadelphia Exposition, the centennial year of American independence. It was a time to show off American industry to visiting Europeans. But what stole the show was an exhibit of industrial tools, products, and training manuals from the Moscow Imperial Technical School. Russian technical education and industrial training, far superior to anything in the U.S., impressed Massachusetts Institute of Technology President John D. Runkle. Having himself tried with limited success to train industrial shop teachers, he thought that the Russian technical education methods held "the philosophical key to all industrial education." Soon after (1879), MIT's Runkle, along with Washington University (St. Louis) Professor Calvin W. Woodward, promoted manual training (also called vocational education and industrial training) in U.S. public schools. The new subject spread quickly, as its usefulness was endorsed by business, labor, educators, and social workers. It was boosted by World War I industrial and technical needs. The 1917 Smith-Hughes Act gave federal aid to vocational education, as the 1914 Smith-Lever Act had given federal aid to agricultural extension education. Those prepared in manual training schools, working in industry and agriculture, helped make the U.S. the world's leading industrial power.

This industrial arts educational borrowing from Russia is described in educational historian Lawrence A. Cremin's prizewinning The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957. The title, Transformation of the School, indicates what happened to American education. The twentieth century was the American century in part because of the transformation of American schools. So wrote Benjamin C. Duke, professor of comparative and international education, International Christian University, Toyko, in his Education and Leadership for the Twenty-First

Century: Japan, America, and Britain (Praeger, 1992). We took European school ideas, largely elite oriented, class divided, and subject dominated; tested them on the rough washboard of the American frontier; and transformed them to fit our unique American aspirations and needs. It was the frontier, the immigrant flood, rapid industrialization, a leveling of class barriers, and growing democratization that helped make our schools student-centered, with much student-teacher interaction, suffused with pragmatic trial and error, where (in theory and often in fact) everyone mattered, everyone was teachable, everyone could be a leader or near leader. This ideal, not always lived up to, was achieved by enough middle class and enough rising lower class students to spread the myth that in America you could try and win, like Henry Ford, like Sam Walton.

General MacArthur's military government set out in 1945 to democratize defeated Japan and to dismantle its traditional schools controlled by the Ministry of Education. The Fundamental Law of Education, 1947, influenced by American authorities, reads: "Education shall aim at the full development of personality...and be imbued with the independent spirit." Thus did the U. S. attempt to turn a nation of followers into independent, creative people.

"Because of a unique twist in modern history," wrote Duke, "the Americans had an opportunity to project their revolutionary concepts in education onto Japan." It never happened. Japan retained the American 6-3-3 school ladder but dropped local school boards and returned to traditional school memorization and conformity, and to its society's vertical system of duties and loyalties that had served it well for centuries. It does not fit Japan's culture for students to be the center of the learning process, to have student-teacher interaction, and to stimulate independent thinking. To do so was too radical for Japan, which turned from the American influence. For the Japanese, to express themselves in a formal setting before their peers leads to embarrassment. To stand out from others makes them uncomfortable. The protruding nail gets knocked down. The Japanese prize harmony and consensus. That is why the Japanese prefer waiting until they feel everyone is satisfied before making final decisions. With a population of 120 million, about half the U.S. population, crowded together on less land than California, having absorbed Confucianism from China as a way of life (loyalty to those above and responsibility to those below), and having to import and pay for about half of all resources needed to survive, Japan believes above all in working together in harmony and in conformity. It is like having ten children crowded on a bed. They have to turn over together or chaos will result.

In Japan it is traditional to have students sit quietly; absorb the sage-teacher's wisdom; memorize important parts of texts; be pushed by "Education Mamas" (Kyoka, or education-concerned mother); study without having to do chores at home, or hold a part

time job, or play after school. They prefer to compete on exams and to try to get into the best possible schools: the best kindergarten, leading to the best elementary school, leading to the best junior secondary school (all free), leading to the best fee-charging senior secondary school, leading to the best university, leading to the best national company for lifelong employment. Schools that use memorization and drill to produce harmony and consensus helped make Japan the world's leading economic power.

Finally, a quick look at current U.S. school reform pressures toward a national curriculum, national testing, and parental choice. These pressures come from U.S. students' poor academic showing on international tests; from concern about lowered SAT and other test scores as more and more students took them; from the 1983 Nation at Risk report which warned grimly about "a rising tide of mediocrity" in our schools; from President Bush's Education Summit of the 50 state governors, September 27-28, 1989, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; and from the resulting six national education goals. Behind school reform pressures, fundamentally, is our economic fear about U.S. capacity to compete in the global economy.

John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe's 1990 book, Politics, Markets, and American Schools (Brookings Institution, Washington, DC) urges parental choice of schools and freedom from bureaucratic interference as the key to U.S. school reform. They want to nationalize Minnesota's plan for statewide parental choice of public schools across school district lines and the Milwaukee, WI, choice plan. Chubb and Moe have since written A Lesson in School Reform from Great Britain (Brookings Institution, 1992) showing how Britain enacted in one bold package, in its Education Reform Act of 1988, what Americans are currently arguing about: a national curriculum, national testing, and parental choice of schools. Will such borrowings work in the U.S., historically committed to plural and diverse local school control?

To help its debate on a national curriculum and national testing, Congress created in 1991 a 32-member National Council on Education Standards and Testing which published its first report, Raising Standards for American Education (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992). As background to that report, Congress commissioned an Office of Technology Assessment report, Testing in American Schools: Asking the Right Questions (Washington, DC: Office of Technology Assessment, 1992), in which experts describe national curriculum and testing in China, the former USSR, Japan, France, Germany, Sweden, and England and Wales. Thus, the search for models continues.

I end as I began, using the above examples to indicate the crucial importance of comparative and international education studies as America reconstructs its schools and considers other countries' experiences.